

CIA insider protests from outside

By LISA NEWMAN
STAFF WRITER

On a balmy evening in 1968, Ralph McGehee, a career CIA officer of 16 years, sat in his stark "agency" apartment in Saigon. Helicopters circled above, emitting staccato blasts of gunfire, while in the distance, "B-52s dropped another string of bombs on South Vietnamese men, women and children.

"I sat there in Saigon thinking about all that had led me to this private hell," wrote McGehee in a recently-released book. "My idealism, my patriotism, my ambition, my plans to be a good intelligence officer to help my country fight the Communist scourge — what the hell had

happened? Why were we napalming young children ... the people we were trying to save? Why did the CIA, my employer for 16 years, report lies instead of the truth?"

His questioning turned to anguish, and then one night McGehee, 40, put his head into his trembling hands and broke down in tears.

In an interview last weekend in San Francisco, retired CIA officer McGehee explained the process that led him to the edge of despair, almost madness, as a career officer in the Central Intelligence Agency.

McGehee thought about the destruction, the death, that surrounded him in Vietnam. "The photographs of young Viet-

namese children burned by napalm destroyed me," McGehee wrote in his autobiographical book entitled "Deadly Deceits, My 25 Years in the CIA." "I wanted out of this massacre ..."

McGehee contemplated killing himself, he wrote, although perhaps it was only a fleeting thought as he sat alone and distraught in the capital of South Vietnam. "I thought about the loaded AR-15 by my bed upstairs and the small loaded pistol in my nightstand. I could kill myself. It would be easy. But if I did, I rationalized, by death should accomplish some purpose."

McGehee felt compelled to try another course of action. He mused over the thought of hanging a banner out the window — a message such as "THE CIA LIES" or "FUCK THE CIA", he wrote in the introductory chapter of "Deadly Deceits," recently released in paperback.

Soon after, McGehee left Vietnam to come home. He stayed with the agency until he retired in 1977.

In the Bay Area last weekend as a guest speaker at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Fair, a two-day symposium designed to help Vietnam veterans cope with tragic legacies of the Vietnam era, McGehee said he hoped to help veterans understand the CIA's prolongation of the war.

McGehee spoke softly and thoughtfully of his frustrations and anguish in a career that lasted 25 years.

"I was awarded the career agency medal when I retired," McGehee said with a tone of amusement. He said the CIA hoped it would "keep him quiet" after retirement.

"For the first 16 years that I was in the agency," McGehee said, "I was very much a committed agency man, what they called a 'company man.' I couldn't tolerate any criticisms of the agency at all.

I thought it was an intelligence agency out saving the world for democracy. I was then assigned to a province in Northeastern Thailand. I began intelligence collection for a counter-insurgency program with the 50,000-man Thailand national police force. I set up a pilot project to test how we could use this massive force to do this sort of thing (intelligence gathering.)"

McGehee said, "It was an organized mass questioning and interrogation program. We called it a district survey — (each village representing a separate district) and I gathered together all the information on the district from all the American file systems and my Thai counterpart gathered together all the information on the district from the Thai organizations. I prepared situation reports on 10 villages and on the district as a whole.

"We trained a 25-man team in interrogation and questioning procedures, and they would go into a village and would isolate people, take one person off for questioning — ultimately we would get one confession — a confession that the man had been organizing with the Farmer's Liberation Association for the Communist Party of Thailand.

McGehee's project, completed after nine months, documented the sympathies or outright sup-

port of Communist guerrillas among 2,500 Thai villagers. The individuals were identified after the long, sometimes tedious process of intense questioning of villagers in areas frequented by guerrillas.

McGehee said the agency used "benign" interrogation techniques that didn't involve physical violence.

His project was successful in destroying the Communist movement in the province, McGehee said, because the agency destroyed "the shield of secrecy that was protecting the (Communist) organizational networks in the villages. Where ever the team operated, the Thai counter-insurgency authorities noted that the insurgency seemed to collapse."

Immensely proud of his work, McGehee hoped he would be assigned to another tour in Thailand, which would have permitted him to enlarge the project for the entire country.

Although he received the highest praise for his work in Thailand, after initial approval to return to continue his work in that country, McGehee was told to return to headquarters in Washington, D.C. His report, McGehee said, was suppressed.

Upon returning to CIA offices in Langley, Virginia, McGehee said he saw the intelligence report from Thailand and realized that the essence of his documentation had been changed: While the agency said there were 2,500 Communists in Thailand, McGehee's intelligence noted that many insurgents in one province alone. The report also said the guerrillas "had absolutely no support of the people," which was not true, McGehee said.